



Pick Your Path to Health

Drinking and Driving

Does being a woman make you vulnerable to alcohol's effects?

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) reports that women achieve higher concentrations of alcohol in the blood and become more impaired than men after drinking equivalent amounts of alcohol.

While driving a car can be fun and provide a liberating experience for both men and women, when combined with alcohol, it becomes a public health crisis that takes many lives every year.

Who Me?

If you are not a heavy drinker, you may quickly assume this topic doesn't concern you. But do you realize that just a small amount of alcohol may put you in the drunk-driver category? And because alcohol is metabolized differently by each person, it is impossible to know how much alcohol can safely be consumed before driving. Alcohol in any amount can impair judgement and affect critical driving skills, with fatal results.

Consider that for 1999, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported:

- Almost 16,000 fatal alcohol-related crashes.
- Roughly 308,000 injuries from alcohol-related crashes.
- Alcohol was to blame for the deaths of 21 percent of all of the children under 15 years of age who died in car crashes.

If you consume alcohol, the best bet—always—is to wait at least several hours before getting behind the wheel or not drive at all.

Alcohol and Women

While women must be particularly vigilant about the amount of alcohol they consume in the hours before they drive, research shows many women are making smart choices about alcohol before getting behind the wheel.

According to NIAAA:

- Women are less likely to drive after drinking.

- Women are less likely to view drinking and driving as acceptable behavior.
- African American women are more likely to abstain from alcohol.

Improvement Needed

No one is immune to the consequences of drinking and driving, and while more research is needed, there are some issues of particular concern to African Americans. According to the NIAAA:

- A greater proportion of African American women experience alcohol-related health problems.
- Heavy drinking remained stable among African American men and women and white women between 1984 and 1992.
- African Americans are also more likely to die of alcohol-related illnesses and injuries, such as cirrhosis of the liver and alcohol-related car crashes.

And, according to Mothers Against Drunk Driving:

- Almost half of all African American drivers, passengers, pedestrians, and cyclists killed in motor vehicle crashes had been drinking.
- Seat belt use among African Americans is about 10 percentage points lower than the national average.
- There are few programs specifically directed at African Americans to prevent drinking and driving.

What Can I Do?

Stricter laws and lower BAC limits may help reduce the number of alcohol-related crashes and fatalities. But the most effective prevention is in you. Restraining yourself from drinking and driving may save your life and the lives of others who may become innocent victims.

Choose the healthy habit to not drink and drive. Lead by example and:

- Designate a driver.
- Don't ride with a driver who is impaired by alcohol.
- Talk with your family members about the dangers of drinking and driving, especially with young people who are in a high-risk category. Help them become aware of marketing practices that entice them to drink.
- Always wear a seatbelt.

- Monitor how much you drink every day. Even if you don't plan to drive after consuming alcohol, cutting back on your drinking will be a boost to your health.

Driving sober is the only way to truly enjoy the benefits of driving. When you drive sober, you have better control over your own life and you have the knowledge that you are doing everything you can to reduce the risk of injury or death for others. Those who kill innocent victims as a result of their own drinking have a lifetime to regret their selfish decisions. And if, as a passenger, your driver has had too much to drink, take action. Take away the car keys and call a cab.

Make the commitment now to do everything you can to stop drinking and driving from taking away one more life. It's the only responsible way to help you and others enjoy a path to good health and safety.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."